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Ministry of Advanced Education

$600K TO BUILD FOUR GATHERING PLACES AT NLC CAMPUSES

FORT ST. JOHN – The Province is providing Northern Lights College with $600,000 to develop gathering places at four campuses, enhancing support services for their growing number of Aboriginal students, Peace River North MLA Richard Neufeld announced today.

"The government of British Columbia is committed to working with First Nations to provide the necessary supports to make all British Columbians prosper," said Neufeld. "These gathering places are one example of the work we are doing to foster this new relationship."

Up to $15 million will be provided for Aboriginal gathering places at public post-secondary institutions over the next three years. Besides Northern Lights College, the first round of funding includes Okanagan College, Kwantlen University College, the College of the Rockies, Langara College and the College of New Caledonia. The funding is part of the Province's $65-million strategy to help Aboriginal students start, stay in and succeed in post-secondary education.

"We are breaking down the barriers that have prevented so many of our Aboriginal people from being all they can be," Advanced Education Minister Murray Coell said. "At the same time, we're helping our province meet skills shortages by making sure the growing number of young Aboriginal people in B.C. have the knowledge and skills to build great careers."

Northern Lights College will develop gathering places for Aboriginal students at its Chetwynd, Dawson Creek, Fort Nelson and Fort St. John campuses. Plans call for construction to create 72-square-metre gathering places that will feature artwork and cultural artifacts commissioned by local Aboriginal bands. They will contain private study spaces, a learning services kiosk and help desk, a presentation area and a utility kitchen. The rooms will use colours and textures that evoke the four elements – fire, water, earth and wind. The college's geographic area includes eight distinct Aboriginal cultures: Tlingit, Tahltan, Slavey, Cree, Saulteau, Dunneza, Dene and Métis.

"The gathering places funding will allow NLC to make its campus facilities more comfortable locations for our Aboriginal learners," said Jean Valgardson, college president. "We have a growing number of Aboriginal students enrolling in our institution, along with programs that we take to Aboriginal communities, and if we can provide our Aboriginal learners with familiar links to their culture and heritage, that can only enhance their academic experience."

More than 17,200 First Nation, Métis and Inuit students attended B.C.'s public post-secondary institutions in 2007, an increase of more than 16 per cent since 2002. However, according to B.C. Statistics, a non-Aboriginal person is five times as likely to have a university degree as an Aboriginal person living on reserve, and almost three times more likely than an Aboriginal person off reserve.

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Improving quality and choice in education is a key pillar of the Province's Pacific Leadership Agenda. The gathering places funding also supports the government's commitments through the Transformative Change Accord and the Métis Nation Relationship Accord to close the gaps by 2015 in education, health, housing, and economic opportunities that separate Aboriginal British Columbians from other residents.

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